

# Proposed Academic Program for Craft Workers in Historic Preservation

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**A**n acute shortage of adequately trained craftsmen in the preservation field conceals an even graver shortage—that of craftsmen who are both technically proficient and artistically literate. This condition (of the so-called “headless hand”) is the consequence of the industrialization of the building field during the last century or so—a process which effectively ended that symbiotic relationship between designer and fabricator, which had always characterized architectural and artifactual production in pre-industrial epochs. Such a dissolution might have been inevitable, given the ineluctable demands of standardized serial mass production; but it has not been achieved without costs, the most serious of which was to rob the craftsman of any role or voice in the design process itself. Robbed of such participation, the craftsman was also rendered illiterate; denied any functional access to the expertise and literature which characterized any craft—from gold smithing to cabinet work and stair building and ultimately to architecture itself. Robbed of any opportunity to apply his own talent and training to the solution of day-to-day problems in the field and workshops, the craftsman’s critical capacities simply atrophied. Such a communal illiteracy has seriously compromised the ability of even the most competent craftsman in the field of historic preservation. In the contemporary building industry, this process is controlled by its working documents—specifications and working drawings—covering in minute detail every aspect of the process. Any creative participation by the building trade workers is explicitly forbidden. The craftsman becomes a “headless hand” and the atrophy of his critical capacity becomes inevitable.

What is needed urgently today is a nationwide network of training programs for historic preservation craftsmen which would complement the existing system of 57 colleges and universities offering the professional degree—M.Sc. in Historic Preservation. These proposed programs would be for a two-year undergraduate degree at the community college level. Curricula would aim at producing technically competent and artistically literate graduates. Curricula would combine handicraft, workshop, and technology lectures and lab classes along

with art history and architectural classes and field trips. The curricula would include optional tracks for students wishing to specialize in carpentry, masonry, plaster, metal work, etc.

Historically, in the modern building industry as a whole, this process of producing “the headless hand” might have been inevitable. There is, however, one sector of the industry in which such a condition is not inevitable—namely, the preservation and restoration of historic structures. Here, all the pre-industrial norms are fully operational: the crafts of brick and stone masonry, plastering, glazing, metal work, water, and sanitary, heating, and ventilation systems all employ pre-industrial materials, methods, and theories. When the conservationist employs these historic means of restoring a historic house, he is in effect reviving a dead technology. He is simultaneously recreating the conditions for a revival of the lost symbiosis between building designers and building craftsmen.

At first glance, this might be mistaken for the sort of revival which John Ruskin and William Morris visualized in the 19th century, when they proposed handicraft production as being a viable alternative to the industrialized mass production which was sweeping across the Western World. To a limited extent, Morris did succeed in craft production of some elegant, upper-class products such as fabrics, papers, and carpets. But his shops were never able really to compete with mass industrialized production. The situation is different in America today, when a large and growing percentage of the building industry dollar is already represented by the preservation, renovation, and modification of buildings. This provides the objective basis for visualizing a closing of the gap between designer and craftsman, at least in this sector of American life; and thereby the possibility of restoring that symbiosis which characterized all artifact-making before the industrial revolution.

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